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ARMENIAN

Folk Songs and Dances

NICOLAS MATTHEY

played by

NICOLAS MATTHEY

and His Oriental Orchestra

Oriental Series
Volume 1

Decca Album No. 68

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COMPLETE ON FIVE 10-INCH RECORDS
DECCA ALBUM No. 68

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ARMENIAN FOLK SONGS AND DANCES

Down through the ages music has been divided into two great classes: the music composed by individuals and the music collectively improvised by the various races. For some time, now, the music of the second type has been called 'folk music' and its origins trace back to primitive times. Anthropologists and archaeologists have found folk music of inestimable value in their researches. In its songs and dances they have discovered the

racial characteristics of the people who produced it—so much so, that they have been able veritably to reconstruct a people's culture from the evidences present in their folk music. Especially helpful has folk music been to the student of the oldest races, those peoples inhabiting the Orient. DECCA has observed with considerable interest the value that the folk music of the orientals has for students, and has also noticed how beautiful is much of the melody that permeates these ancient songs. As a result this new series devoted to the presentation of representative samples of oriental folk music is being inaugurated. In this initial collection the music is drawn from the folk songs and dances of Armenia, and is performed in authentic Armenian style by Nicolas Matthey and his Oriental Orchestra.

One of the oldest races of the world, the Armenians are generally associated with the Orient. Their origins, however, are rather in an unascertained European locale (possibly the Balkans), as their language stems from Indo-European roots. About 2000 years before the coming of Christ they moved stakes into Asia Minor and populated an expanse between the Black and Caspian Seas. Over their early history in Asia Minor there lies a veil of obscurity, as the records of this era were destroyed upon the adoption of Christianity as the official state religion in the third century. Armenian folk lore that has survived, however, has preserved some clues to the Armenian story of the period.

The Armenians, by virtue of their occupation of the valley of Mount Ararat (which they called *Massis,* mother of the world, doubtless because of its regenerative significance), rested at the crossroads of empires. Arabia, Persia, Assyria, Rome and Turkey encircled them. Wars and destruction passed them by as these great powers rose and fell. All this made a deep impress on Armenian culture, for the passing conquerors deposited fragments of their own cultures on the doorsteps of the oriental-occidentals. In this constant flux, Armenian folk lore remained intact, though resplendently enriched.

From those early days on, Armenian folk songs and dances were transmitted from generation to generation by a group known as *Ashougs* (troubadour-minstrels) who performed without the benefits of musical notation, as at first notation among the Armenians was the exclusive property of the church, to be used only by the clergy for liturgical purposes. Later, this uncivilized procedure continued to prevail—so far as the laity were concerned—because of the Armenians' vicissitudes which kept them in a backward state. They had succumbed to the omnipotent Turkish Empire and thereby had become so completely isolated from the remainder of the world that cultural developments obviously lagged. Art had no opportunity to shed its primitive garments.

But by 1827, or thereabouts, the situation had become manifestly changed. The Turkish yoke had been smashed sometime before and Russian ideologies, westernized under the influence of Peter the Great, filtered into Armenia through Caucasus. Armenian music assimilated many of the Russian practices. Notation appeared. Folk songs and dances were harmonized and sometimes orchestrated. Armenian music put on long trousers, so to speak.

Foremost protagonist in this germinative process was a monk composer, Komitas Vartabet by name, who collected the songs of his people, harmonized them according to 'western' standards and wrote them down for posterity. Most of the songs he collected originated among the peasants. Their content concerned descriptions of surroundings and apostrophes to nature. Since, these folk songs have frequently supplied the materials for compositions in the larger forms.

Of considerable interest is the fact that it was this folk music that cemented Armenian

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This essay based on notes supplied by Mr. Ruben Stepanian.

identity when the race was exposed to the possibility of absorption by the great powers with whom it had such constant intercourse. Small wonder is it, then, that their folk music has such an hypnotic appeal to the Armenian people. It has been their parting of the Red Sea to save them from the pursuing bands of Empires who would have devoured them.

A people with such a variegated history can be expected to have a musical toolshed all its own. That is to say, one would necessarily expect to find native instruments, unlike our familiar musical instruments, among the Armenians. And so it is. Their principal instruments are the *Saz,* plucked like a lute; the *Kiamen,* bulbous, but bowed like a violin, though held in a vertical position; and the *Zoorna,* a high pitched reed. From these instruments polyphonic orchestras have been formed. Since the appearance of the Russian influence, however, the Armenians have enjoyed modern orchestras, too.

Music in Armenia, today, is almost completely westernized. In Erivan, the capital, a national conservatory is training musicians and composers in modern methods of writing and performing music. Choral and symphonic music, based on Armenian folk themes, is Russian in character, melodic treatment, harmonic and structural design, and in orchestral color. But lest it be thought that the Armenian musicians have bequeathed nothing to the Russians, one should observe reciprocity at work. Leading Russian composers, particularly the members of the Balakirev Circle, have based some of their leading compositions on themes drawn from Armenian folk music. This is hardly surprising, as the susceptible Russian mind could not resist the seductive oriental fragrance of Armenian music and culture.

The break from the ancient character of Armenian music, it is true, has fostered a relaxation of the minor mode, a freer employ of instrumentation and alterations in the phrase structure; but these changes have singularly affected music in the larger forms, the music composed by individuals. Folk music in its comely way has clung unrelentingly to its original simplicity, its minor tonalities, its measured phrasings and its unsophisticated harmonizations.

In this album Armenian folk songs and dances are on display as they have existed for considerable time. The music is unpretentious, direct, charming. The scope of this collection embraces the whole gamut of the emotions, from nostalgic to exuberant.

Of those records containing music for the dance, possibly the disc containing the *Rangui* and the *Tashn Tchors,* will evoke the most interest. For these are typical of most Armenian folk dances, which are strongly syncopated. Like the folk music, their origins are traceable to the times when the Armenians lived in the valley of Ararat. The *Rangui,* danced by a young lady and her escort, is basically a dance of grace, with flirtatious appendages; the *Tashn Tchors* (dance of Fourteen), danced by fourteen participants, is characterized by daintiness. Besides these, the album contains a lively, joyous wedding dance.

Returning to the songs, probably the most characteristic folk song is *Krounk* (the Stork). Like the Jews and Gypsies, many Armenians are denizens of the world, and their longing for their homeland is often expressed in such contemplative melodies as *Krounk.* Here they regain, momentarily, contact with the land of their forbears by quizzing the stork of news in Armenia. Along the martial front, indispensible in any true folk song collection, there is *Hail To Antranic,* a tribute to Armenia's late military leader of the same name. In addition the collection contains a motley potpourri of lullabies, love songs, airs, descriptive songs and the like; in all a representative parade of genuine Armenian folk music that loses none of its primitive savoriness even when played by the modern instruments in Nicolas Matthey's Oriental Orchestra.

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